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Media should treat birth control, romanticism evenha

H. Harrison Jenkins
On The Record

Reading pleasantly a collection of classic Southern humor, including pieces by Columbians William Price Fox and Franklin Ashley, I paused occasionally to glance at the glistening colors of the Zenith — TV picture ablaze but sound splashed into silence. What did I see?

I knew none of the soap-operish characters prancing through Dallas or some grape plantation in California (or wherever), but I saw them sprawling abed and bundling without benefit of the old-fashioned "bundling board" or the prescribed clothes. In lucid and more than suggestive sexual embrace, they smooched and hugged until the camera cut away.

My mind skipped to the steady erosion of Planned Parenthood and the emphasis on birth control — here in Carolina — and throughout our TV-addicted nation and the planet. What tragedies unfold when we, as a people, fail to provide adequate counsel to persons young and old — especially the former — who are enticed into sexual exploration without knowledge of the potential dangers.

A professor at Emory University, Dr. Luella Klein, wisely floats a plea to the media from Atlanta. She's on the faculty of the School of Medicine and is the first woman president of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

Here's her message: the media, particularly TV and movies, could almost single-handedly give restored visibility and respectability to birth control. As a consequence, she says, the three million unintended pregnancies that occur in the nation each year — many in the Palmetto State — could be significantly reduced. Right.

She perceives a "conspiracy of silence" in the media at the moment. Sex is always presented as romantic or interesting — and the results of sexual intimacy are invariably ignored. The absence of even the words *contraception* or *birth control* is unrealistic and tragic, as if mention of them might convey a message of social disapproval. How wrong can we be?

The real world is akin to the romantic world of visual imagery. Sex is handled unrealistically. More than half of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unsought or occur before the woman wanted an offspring. And half of those are terminated by abortions. Many would not be required with adequate birth control.

What would happen if birth control habits and contraceptives were socially acceptable and fully known to those million-plus teenagers who suddenly awake to find themselves unintentionally pregnant?

Contraception isn't hazardous. Deaths from pregnancy far, far exceed those from any contraceptive devices, new or old.

Equally as discouraging is the fact that by devious devices the Reagan administration misdirects portions of the $14 million we should be giving to the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

The IPPF convinces women in dozens of overpopulated, underfed Third World countries that, with their average of 12 to 20 pregnancies, they are not leading truly productive lives. Far too often, mass hunger results with thousands of wee bairns perishing before our eyes in places like Ethiopia.

Consider: not five of 46 black African countries have a self-sufficiency in food that isn't being erased by uncontrolled population growth.

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Perhaps someone in the Reagan administration remembers, or can find in the State Department files, the noble examples of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and his administration. In at least four Latin American nations, we very quietly agreed with their governments to institute national systems of birth control. Although success,was erratic, given the *machismo* of Latin males, the system worked. I visited one of the village clinics in an Andean country, watched the peasants receive instructions and contraceptives, talked with physicians and federal directors of the program. Covertly, the Roman Catholic hierarchy agreed to look the other way in those cooperative nations.

In one country, I pored over parish records, with the consent of the priest, to inspect births and deaths. My discovery was an important revelation to me: four of five children died before reaching the age of one; many more at birth. Health care improves sporadically in the southern nations, but birth control is utterly essential. A matter of life and death.

It is high time for the media of this land — the newspapers included — to educate the populace, teens especially, on planned parenthood and pregnancy-avoidance.

Should the vast wasteland of overly romanticized sex in television be made more realistic with birth control advisories, then our collective life would be vastly better and healthier for all. The problem, you see, is that by romanticizing "naturalism," we of the media are actually unrealistic.

A "bundling board" in modern form is essential.